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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TUNIS 001085

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STATE FOR NEA (DIBBLE), NEA/MAG (WELLS, LAWRENCE), NEA/PPD (QUINN, SMITH, GLAZIER), NEA/PI (MULENEX, KIRBY), DRL (BUTLER)

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TAGS: [KPAO](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [TS](#) [KMEPI](#)

SUBJECT: TUNISIAN JOURNALISTS DIVIDED OVER ASSOCIATION REPORT ON SITUATION OF THE PRESS

REF: A. 2004 TUNIS 2255

[B](#). TUNIS 977

[C](#). 2004 TUNIS 1798

Classified By: Amb. William J. Hudson; reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

1.(C) Summary. On May 3, the QUANGO Tunisian Journalists Association (AJT) released two very different reports on the situation of the press in the country. The six pro-government members of the AJT board produced a mild report, while the three "independent" members elected to the AJT board in September 2004 (Ref A) released another more hard-hitting report. The pro-government faction then sought to discipline the "independent" members and distance the AJT from their report. The two factions reached a compromise on May 13 that allowed the "independent" members to remain on the board, but the AJT publicly rejected their more critical report. This contretemps shows that while there is a growing number of journalists willing to speak publicly about the journalistic reality in Tunisia, the majority still fears government reprisals. This division reflects the weakened condition of a press long hobbled by government control and self-censorship. End Summary.

Background

2.(C) The AJT is the only government-recognized journalist association in Tunisia. Long known for its close ties to the GOT, it was suspended from the International Federation of Journalists in March 2004 for failure to protect or advance the rights of journalists in the country. In a historic election in September 2004, three journalists (Zyed El-Heni, Neji Baghourri and Mohsen Abderahmane) won seats on the AJT board after running on an "independent" ticket that promised to work within the system to seriously address the problems facing Tunisian journalists. (Ref A)

A Tale of Two Reports

3.(C) Zyed El-Heni provided IO with the following insight into the functioning of the AJT and the events surrounding the release of two AJT reports on World Press Freedom Day, May 3, 2005. (Ref B) He explained that, on March 10, the AJT board decided that they would handle the drafting of the 2005 report and designated "independent" Neji Baghourri as the secretary for the project with responsibility for compiling

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the different inputs and drafting the final report. The board divided up areas of responsibility and agreed to meet back on April 28. On April 28, El-Heni reports that AJT President Faouzi Bouzaïene instructed the board members to provide their inputs to another "pro-government" member of the board, Jamel Karmaoui, instead of to Baghourri. The three "independent" members allegedly refused to do so and a compromise was reached in which Baghourri would combine all of the different angles to ensure that both the "pro-government" and the "independent" point of view was represented.

4.(C) El-Heni reports that, on May 2, the other board members refused Baghourri's version of the report and presented their own report which opened with a laudatory paragraph for all of President Ben Ali's support and contributions to the media sector. This report (not yet translated into English or French) contained general calls for the improvement of the financial and administrative status of Tunisian journalists. Baghourri and Abderahmane refused to approve the "official version" which was passed by the other six members of the board. (El-Heni was absent due to a family emergency.) On May 3, the AJT board published its "official version" at the same time that the three independent members distributed their own more critical report (on "the rampant violations undergone by Tunisian journalists under the form of censorship, harassment, and various other sorts of oppression") by e-mail, fax, and listserv. Both reports were issued in the name of the AJT.

Failed Attempt to Expel the Independent Members

5.(U) On May 4, the AJT issued a communique that denounced the parallel report. On May 5, Bouzaïene held a press

conference on the issue. On May 7, (Ref B) Baghourri was called in to police headquarters and questioned as to the authority under which he presumed to send out reports on the state of the press in Tunisia. On May 10, the AJT announced a decision to exclude the three independent members from the organization.

6.(C) On May 13, AJT held a meeting of their steering committee. El-Heni reported that, at the same time that the meeting was held, over fifty journalists assembled in adjacent rooms at AJT headquarters, presented a petition in support of the independent members, and sang the Tunisian national anthem. El-Heni called this "a historic day" for AJT, claiming that similar orchestrated movements of support for fellow journalists have never occurred in Tunisia. El-Heni mentioned to the IO that, during this meeting, Bouzaïene accused El-Heni of "having visited the US Embassy shortly before May 3 and having transmitted documents to US officials." El-Heni denied this false allegation and challenged Bouzaïene to open an investigation into such a charge. In the end, according to El-Heni, this meeting resulted in an agreement that the three independent members would remove the AJT name from their report and would continue as members of the board.

Misleading Communiques Seek to Discredit Independent Members

7.(C) The story does not end there. On May 14, private Arabic daily "Ash Shourouq" (which reportedly takes editorial direction from Presidential Counselor Abdelwaheb Abdallah) printed an AJT communique stating that the three independent members had "apologized" for their actions. On May 15, most other papers ran an AJT communique stating that the three independent members had "acknowledged the errors of their ways." El-Heni provided the IO with the language of the communique that had actually been agreed upon on May 13 by the steering committee. Contrary to what had appeared in the local press, it noted that "there were errors on all sides" and contained no acceptance of guilt on the part of the independents. El-Heni interpreted this final tactic of distributing inaccurate communiques as an attempt by the GOT to discredit the three independent members. El-Heni noted, however, that the GOT had not succeeded as too many journalists knew the facts and supported his actions.

Comment

8.(C) This story confirms that the AJT remains under GOT control, but suggests that such control may be slipping as journalists begin to stand together in support of their own rights. It shows that the "private" and very popular (and populist) Arabic daily "Ash-Shourouq" remains willing to do the government's dirty work in leading the way in publishing false communiques. Further, it shows how links to the U.S. are used in attempts to undermine civil society members who choose to work with us. The Mission remains, however, engaged in support for freedom of expression, and activists such as El-Heni welcome this support.

HUDSON